

Caring For Your Ears

Your ears, and therefore your hearing, can be damaged by trauma, infection, or even excessive personal hygiene. The hearing mechanisms are delicate.

AT A GLANCE

- Never put anything inside an ear to remove wax or to scratch
- Keep the ear canal free of obstructions
- Some ear infections can damage hearing
- Physical trauma can rupture your ear drum and damage the delicate bones of the middle ear
- Protect your ears from loud noise.

EAR WAX

What is it?

Ear wax is normal. It's a natural protector of the ear.

Ear wax is produced in the ear canal, by the cerumen and sebum glands. The discharge from these glands, skin flakes, dust and other debris create wax which works its way to the entrance of the ear. As we get older, ear wax can become drier.

Is wax causing a problem?

Wax can build up and block the ear canal. It is more common in men.

This usually happens if the ear canal is narrow or hairs or a hearing aid mould are obstructing it. Symptoms of wax build up include dull hearing, tinnitus, earache, vertigo, coughing, a feeling that the ear is plugged up, and sometimes jaw and facial pain.

What to do about it?

Never put anything in the ear to remove wax – this has been known to damage the ear drum and the delicate bones of the middle ear.

Only excessive wax or wax causing a problem should be removed.

Put a couple of drops of olive or almond oil into the ear and check again in a couple of days.



Visit an ear care professional to get the wax removed. Some Hearing Associations employ an ear nurse who can do this work.

What not to do

- Do not use cotton buds or any other instrument to clear wax as these can push wax further down, make the blockage worse or even rupture the eardrum
- Do not remove the wax by syringing. The water used to flush the ear can aggravate the problem.

MIDDLE EAR INFECTION

Otitis Media

(Chronic Otitis Media is also called Glue Ear)

What Happens

The eardrum or middle ear becomes inflamed or infected causing earache and fever. The infection can produce pus and the eardrum can blister and/or rupture.

- Under-two-year-olds don't have the antibodies to protect against the bacteria causing Otitis Media, making them more susceptible
- The Eustachian tube (running from the back of the nose to the middle ear) can get inflamed, blocking the natural drainage of the middle ear. The infection then travels up the tube to the middle ear
- Other risks can include family history, exposure to smoking, getting infections from other children at school or in child care.

Warning signs in young children

They complain of earache, rub their ear or face close to the ear, have a fever, seem to have difficulty hearing, or their behaviour changes. They may become less interested in listening to stories. They may start to ask for things to be repeated to them.

They may listen to the TV at louder than normal levels. Sometimes they may show distress with high noise levels. They may start to speak inappropriately loudly.

What to do?

Don't delay in taking children to the doctor. Antibiotics will usually clear up the infection.

Children with Otitis Media should have a follow-up check, as some may still have middle ear fluid up to 12 weeks later and this can affect their hearing.

If the symptoms don't settle after a course of antibiotics, a referral to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist or an audiologist may be needed.

The infection can move to the eardrum, causing it to bulge as pressure builds. This is very painful. The eardrum can rupture, draining the pus into the ear canal. It should heal normally if kept dry.

Months of chronic discharge can lead to a larger hole in the ear drum and eventually damaged hearing. Continued infection can lead to erosion of the middle bone of the middle ear, called the incus, possibly resulting in permanent hearing loss.



EXTERNAL EAR INFECTION

Otitis Externa

What Happens

The ear canal is inflamed or infected because:

- Moisture or water in the canal softens the canal skin and infects it with bacteria or fungi. Usually the water empties and the ear dries out, and the bacteria or fungi do not cause any problems.
- Objects are used to scratch the ear
- A skin condition affects the lining of the canal
- Fungal infection sometimes lives on a hearing aid mould.

This results in itchiness, earache, hearing loss, a blocked feeling, and a thin milky discharge. The ear canal may swell and close off.

Skin at the front of, or behind, the ear may become red, sore and swollen and a glandular lump may appear high in the neck. It may be accompanied with fever, nausea and lethargy.

What to do?

Visit the doctor who may prescribe ear drops. Check back with the doctor after seven days.

Keep the ear dry. Severe cases may turn into cellulitis and require hospital treatment.

PHYSICAL TRAUMA

Impact damage from accidents, contact sports, or activities such as fighting or sudden pressure changes can damage or rupture the ear drum.

Skull fractures can sometimes directly damage the inner ears. Closed head injuries can also damage the auditory brain areas, resulting in hearing difficulties that may not be associated with hearing loss or deafness.

Such trauma can also damage the delicate bones of the middle ear which transmit vibrations to the cochlea (inner ear).



NOISE DAMAGE

When noise reaches 85 decibels or more it can cause hearing loss, depending on the length of exposure and the level of sound.

- Exposure to 100 decibels for 15 minutes or more can cause hearing loss. Examples of this level of noise include grinding metal and noisy lawn mowers
- Exposure to 115 decibels after 30 seconds can cause hearing loss. Examples of this level of noise include power saws and chainsaws.

Protecting against noise-induced hearing loss

If a work environment involves noisy machinery or equipment, earmuffs and other safety equipment must be provided. The Department of Labour (www.dol.govt.nz) has more information.

Wear ear muffs if mowing the lawns or using power tools.



Turn the volume of your personal music player down, limit the amount of time it is used and avoid bud earphones.

Wear musician's earplugs at a concert or in loud bars.

If noise exposure has made your ears ring, even temporarily, or feel blocked, then the exposure was too much and you should avoid repeating the exposure.

CHECK YOUR HEARING

Regular hearing tests are just as important as regular eye, blood pressure and other health checks. A hearing test every two years should be a standard part of your health care regime. Take notice of comments from other people about your hearing; other people will often notice the problem with your hearing before you do.